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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001153

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

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SUBJECT: BERRI READY TO START DEALING ON PRESIDENCY

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Yanking the Ambassador into a private room on the margins of a larger 7/30 meeting (septel), Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, his voice lowered to a whisper, urged that the USG help to select acceptable candidates for Lebanon's presidential elections. On/about August 20, Berri will start working with Maronite Patriarch Sfeir on potential presidential candidates. By then, he wants to know who is and who is not acceptable to the USG. He envisions a process of elimination through which a field of candidates emerges that is acceptable to the USG, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and, inside Lebanon, both March 8 and March 14 blocs. Parliament -- most likely a new centrist bloc that emerges with parts of both March 8 and March 14 -- will then elect from that consensus list. That is the only way to ensure the two-thirds quorum Berri argues is required. Told by the Ambassador that the U.S. wants to support Lebanon's constitutional process but not engage in approving specific candidates, Berri scoffed: the USG will be accused of interference anyway, so the USG should at least promote its interests. Berri was scornful of Michel Aoun ("no way") but mentioned MP Robert Ghanem, MP Boutros Harb and LAF Commander Michel Sleiman as the sorts of names he thought would emerge from the back-room politicking in which the clever Berri has long outfoxed more principled rivals. End summary.

TALKING PRESIDENCY: BERRI BELIEVES

THIRD BLOC WILL EMERGE TO ELECT

¶2. (C) Well into a meeting with the Ambassador that included aides (septel), Parliament Speaker Berri, asking for a one-on-one conversation, bounded from his chair to pull the Ambassador into a curious conference-cum-storage room, filled by Nabih Berri memorabilia including portraits in mosaic, brass, mother-of-pearl, etc. (Our favorite: an unmistakable canny likeness of Berri rendered in dried beans and pasta. "A gift," Berri sighed. We noted that the talented legume artist had captured his good side.) It is time, Berri whispered, to talk seriously about the presidency.

¶3. (C) Berri argued that, neither the March 8 nor the March 14 bloc will be the decisive factor in electing Lebanon's president when parliament meets. Instead, a third bloc, looking for reconciliation, will emerge larger than the other two. That third bloc will consist of Berri himself and most of his bloc, a large number of March 14 MPs (Mohammed Safadi and his group, Boutros Harb, most of the Christians from

Jumblatt and Hariri's list), parts of Aoun's bloc (Ily Skaff and his Zahle MPs, Michel Murr and the Armenian Tashnaq, etc.). Most MPs want to be on the side of the winner, Berri explained; few MPs want to be seen as obstacles. As it is clear that March 14 MPs cannot unilaterally elect one of their own ("and which one would they pick?") and equally clear that Michel Aoun has no chance, MPs will flock to a reasonable conciliatory candidate. It is the promise of a reasonable conciliatory president, in fact, that ensures enough MPs will show up to vote to achieve the two-thirds quorum Berri insists is constitutionally required (and that most March 14 leaders accept is preferable politically, if not legally).

BERRI SAYS PLAN ALREADY IN PLACE
FOR HIM TO WORK WITH PATRIARCH ON NAMES

¶4. (C) Berri argued that, with Emile Lahoud's presidential term expiring on November 24, it is important to work now to develop the list of potential conciliatory candidates, so that the MPs have acceptable choices when they convene as an electoral body on September 25. Berri said that he and Maronite Patriarch Sfeir have exchanged messages, and the two of them will begin to work in earnest on August 20 toward this end. (Note: Al-Nahar chairman Ghassan Tueni, usually well plugged in, told the Ambassador and DCM over a 7/30 lunch the same thing, that the Patriarch and Berri would work together to develop a list of candidates starting in August. End note.) While he will meet Sfeir in person only rarely, trusted messengers will shuttle between Bkirki and Ain al-Tineh. The Patriarch, Berri reported, does not want a single name but rather a choice, so that the parliament can

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have a genuine elections.

USG, OTHERS TO INDICATE LIST
OF WHO'S NAUGHTY AND WHO'S NICE

¶5. (C) The USG must be involved in this process, Berri said. He said that he envisioned a process by which the U.S. has a list of acceptable candidates. Ditto for the Syrians and the Saudis. Inside Lebanon, March 8 and March 14 blocs will have their own lists. The Patriarch will have his ideas. Berri said that, in reviewing all of the lists together, he would be able to identify the overlap or the potential overlap. That overlap would form the genesis of the list the Patriarch would ultimately bless as people of sufficient Christian weight for presentation to the parliament. Therefore, he concluded, it is time for the U.S. to stop talking hypothetically ("qualities of a president, his agenda, etc.") but rather move into the real world of Lebanese politics by examining the candidates. Pointing his finger vaguely to the east, Berri emphasized that he was not asking the U.S. to talk to Syria. "I wish you would, but I know you won't." But the U.S. should not be so naive as to assume that no one will talk to Syria. The Syrians cannot choose Lebanon's president, but "they will have their say," particularly in vetoing certain names.

¶6. (C) The Ambassador responded that the USG will not provide a list of names; the Lebanese should decide who is acceptable. "Then tell me who you won't accept," Berri hissed. The Ambassador said that it should be clear where are our red lines: we oppose any candidate who would win because of intimidation, manipulation of the constitutional process, or solely because of links to Hizballah, Iran, and Syria. But within that framework, the USG supports a made-in-Lebanon president. Saying that it was "time to stop playing games," Berri said that the USG will be accused of interfering in the process, "no matter what you do." The USG might as well get some benefit out of the charges. The USG cannot allow the French, who are already musing about names, be the sole Western representative who is trying to tip the

field toward some candidates and away from others. "The French aren't serious; everyone's waiting for you." The Ambassador repeated that the USG is not indicating preferences for names or vetoes of others. "Come see me in a week or so," Berri said. "You'll have names."

"NO WAY" FOR AOUN TO BECOME PRESIDENT;
NASRALLAH "STUPID" FOR AOUN ALLIANCE

¶7. (C) The Ambassador noted that Michel Aoun must be Berri's candidate, given Berri's partnership with Hizballah, in turn cooperating with Aoun. "No way!" Berri said, at last raising his voice beyond the whispered rasp. Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah "is stupid" for having

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aligned himself so deeply with Aoun. Hizballah does not want Aoun to become president, but now Hizballah cannot figure out how to get out of its alliance gracefully and without giving March 14 a huge victory in the process. Berri vowed to personally bloc Michel Aoun's ascendency to the presidency, no matter what happens in the Metn parliamentary by-elections.

SYRIA'S CHOICES: OBEID NOT ON IT

¶8. (C) The Ambassador asked Berri's view of the rumor in Beirut that Syria has given the green light for five presidential candidates: Jean Obeid, Fares Bouez, Riad Salameh, Michel Sleiman, and Michel Edde. Berri said that Syria does not like Obeid, having determined that Obeid had accepted too many bribes from the Hariri family. Edde is too old and too verbose ("we'd need a 12-year presidency, as his first speech would take up the whole term"). Sleiman will probably make the cut and appear on his list of conciliatory candidates, Berri said. Asked by the Ambassador who else might be on that list after the process of elimination he envisions, Berri mused that MP Boutros Harb and MP Robert Ghanem would likely remain. Both are aligned with March 14, the Ambassador noted. Berri responded that he did not say that March 8 and March 14 candidates would be tossed out automatically. "If I can get a two-thirds quorum for any candidate, I'll be happy," he said.

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FALL-BACK OPTION: CHRISTIAN PM

¶9. (C) As they stood up to rejoin their aides in Berri's regular office, Berri, again whispering, said that, if presidential elections prove impossible, "then we have to look for an acceptable Christian Prime Minister" to assume the presidency until presidential elections occur. The Ambassador rejected the idea, noting that, in essence, Berri was hinting at a second cabinet after all. Not pursuing the subject, Berri asked the Ambassador if he thought Saad Hariri would expect to become PM after a new president takes office (which triggers a new cabinet). The Ambassador nodded. Berri sighed, noting that, despite his current boycott of Siniora because of the lack of Shia representation in the Siniora cabinet, "Siniora is the best prime minister we've had." Hariri should be encouraged to keep Siniora as PM, Berri urged.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Berri (whose comments on the French initiative and other issues will be covered septel) was upbeat. He senses that back-room politicking on the presidency is soon to begin in earnest, and he tends to be a master at that game: patient, clever, opaque. He knows that March 8, his side, cannot on its own elect a president. Without the Aoun

deputies (who will eventually realize that their candidate has no chance), his parliamentary alliance becomes even weaker. But Berri also knows that the March 14 bloc, with its simple majority, will split if its leaders try to vote with only a simple majority rather than two-thirds quorum that even the Patriarch insists upon. Berri thus derives his bargaining power from the fact that March 14 needs sufficient March 8-Aoun MPs to get to the two-thirds quorum.

¶11. (C) We believe, especially after hearing Ghassan Tueni's comments, that Patriarch Sfeir would find the proposal appealing to work quietly on a list of "conciliatory" candidates sufficiently acceptable to ensure that presidential elections indeed take place with the two-thirds quorum. More than anything else, the Patriarch fears a vacuum in the presidency, a fear that Berri can also exploit. As for us, even if we ultimately get dragged into the name-game that we are successfully avoiding thus far, it is far too early to do so. Berri, whose hatred of Aoun seemed sincere, probably hopes to divide the March 14 alliance into those who, scared of a vacuum, are willing to back a compromise candidate and those who are willing to go all the way to the end in trying to push an authentic March 14 candidate. We need to monitor very carefully the real allegiances of the candidates Berri would try to project as conciliatory figures. Of course, those who are primarily conciliatory to Syria are by definition not the proper material for a made-in-Lebanon president.

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